

## CONDOMS

# "Condomophobia"

**Steve Slack**

## Carrying and using a condom should be the norm among 18–24 year olds

Some years ago I went on a guided tour of Egypt. One of the British tourists in our group asked our young, knowledgeable, and proud Egyptian guide whether she gave credence to the theory that aliens had arrived on Earth thousands of years ago, assisting the ancient Egyptians in construction of their pyramids and tutoring them in their relatively advanced medical and surgical interventions. Our guide did little to conceal her annoyance and offence at the question. She responded by saying it was a typical question from a Westerner who came from a culture which could not conceive that ancient Egyptians were capable of such achievements thousands of years ago, while his ancestors were probably still dwelling in caves and rudimentary shelters.

The use of condoms can also be traced back to the ancient Egyptians who are believed to have used a linen sheath for prevention of disease and pregnancy around 1000 BC.

Were we indeed to be visited by aliens from another planet today they could be forgiven for being bewildered and amused by our present day confused and contradictory relationship with the condom and our apparent irrational fear of them—or what equates to an almost collective "condomophobia."

Used correctly and consistently condoms are still one of the best ways of preventing STIs, HIV, and unwanted pregnancies. In spite of their effectiveness and long history though, we still persist in the United Kingdom in seeing the condom as a source of embarrassment and something that should not be talked about or seen. A recent survey commissioned by the Body Shop and MTV, for example, found that 92% of females did not include condoms as an essential item in their handbags. Simon Blake, chief executive of Brook, the sexual health charity for young people, commenting on the report said: "Just like using seatbelts automatically was instilled into

the culture, so too should using a condom as a matter of course." (See our interview with Simon in this issue of SHINE.)

In this issue of SHINE we report on the government campaign "Essential Wear," which aims to make carrying and using a condom the norm among 18–24 year olds in the same way as they might carry with them a mobile phone or lipstick. Some of you may be surprised, however, to hear about the hurdles that had to be negotiated in order for such a campaign to be aired on our television screens and the compromises that had to be made to ensure transmission.

The Broadcasting Advertising Clearance Centre (BACC) is a specialist body responsible for examining TV advertising before transmission and giving final clearance. The organisation, funded by the broadcasters, has a series of restrictions in its guidance on the advertising of condoms on television. For example, the guidance states: "Shots of unwrapped products are not usually acceptable and may, if accepted at all, be restricted to late night transmissions, e.g. post 2230h. Pack shots are acceptable, provided there is nothing on the pack which would be likely to cause offence."

What, you might ask, can possibly be so offensive about an object that prevents STIs, HIV, and unwanted pregnancies?

The guidance further suggests that its approach is intended to avoid offence to viewers who are opposed to the use of contraceptives on religious grounds. It adds: "advertisements for branded contraceptives should not suggest or imply that casual or promiscuous behaviour is in order as long as a contraceptive is used," and there should be nothing in the advertising to suggest that, "the relationships portrayed are anything other than stable and well established." Surely those people involved in so called "casual" or "promiscuous" sexual behaviours are indeed the very people we should be targeting with our advice about condom use.

It is fascinating that these restrictions are placed on images of condoms and displays of promiscuity in advertising yet there appears to be no such restrictions on the offensive sexualisation of women in advertising or, it would seem, restrictions on the showing of condoms in dramas.

Let me give you two examples:

Some weeks ago there was an ITV drama called "The Bad Mother's Handbook" which was aired at 9 pm. Within the first few minutes of the drama we saw a used condom displayed on our television screens. The condom had failed and the storyline was basically about a young woman's subsequent pregnancy and her tumultuous relationship with her mother. During the advertising break viewers were then invited to try a new microwaveable burger. The advert showed a young couple returning from a night out. The woman was portrayed as uncomfortable and wary as she sat on the sofa still wearing her coat buttoned to the neck. The man moved into the kitchen where he put a burger into the microwave and set the timer. The sofa is then shown rotating and by the time the burger is heated up the young woman is lying provocatively on the sofa wearing only lingerie. A voiceover says: "If only everything was 0 to tasty in 70 seconds."

Advertising that shows images of unwrapped condoms is generally not acceptable because it may give offence. Yet adverts that objectify women almost as pieces of meat are acceptable. Advertising showing unwrapped condoms and explanations of how to use them—and the fact that they can prevent disease and unwanted pregnancy—are not acceptable. Dramas showing condoms unwrapped and failing are completely acceptable.

The Sexual Health Independent Advisory Group has decided that it wishes to open a debate with the BACC about these restrictions on the basis that they are outdated and restrict our ability to get across safer sex messages about condom use. In the meantime we at SHINE would like to hear your views about the subject, which we will pass on to the group.

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